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ABSTRACT

Success or failure of a language laboratory is due to a complex set of reasons. An often neglected factor lies in teacher and student attitudes to learner-machine-materials interrelationships. This paper specifies significant factors affecting the establishment of positive attitudes in teachers and students through training. The paper has four parts: (1) negative attitudes in teachers, usually developed because of a teacher's feeling of inadequacy to deal with new technology and teaching methods; (2) elements of training programs and positive attitudes in teachers, showing that feelings of inadequacy can readily be eliminated through proper training and emphasizing the importance of materials preparation; (3) negative attitudes in students, some of which are due to age factors; and (4) training of students, stressing the need for proper orientation, which in turn depends on proper training of the teachers in laboratory functioning and course objectives. (TL)

ORIENTATION AND ATTITUDE FORMATION IN THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

D. Harper

A POWERFUL and hitherto neglected factor in success or failure with the language laboratory lies in the nature of the attitudes of both teacher and student in learner-machine-materials interrelationships. The aim of this paper is to specify significant factors that affect the establishment of positive attitudes in teachers and students through training.

In seeking to account for language-laboratory success or failure, teachers tend to talk in discrete terms. Thus, failure may be blamed solely on the unreliability of the laboratory or on boring materials; success may be explained by reference to the students being motivated by hearing a recording of their own voices. Singling out such reasons and generalising success or failure from them can be misleading, since in the majority of cases success or failure is caused by a complex of reasons which have to be considered in abstract. No single simplistic answer can be given to the following questions:

a. Why, of two teachers with similar training and experience does one have success in the laboratory with a set of materials and another report failure with the same materials?

b. Why is it common to find in the same class of students those who will begin a laboratory exercise, pursue it to the end without stopping and finally tell the teacher that he has finished, and those who may never get beyond the second set of practice items because of the care they take to see that each response they make meets the high standards they have set for themselves?

c. Why does one teacher with the best of equipment and training make little headway with his students in the laboratory while another will persevere successfully with equipment which many would say would be better scrapped?

A factor common to both cases is the attitude of the participants, either positive or negative. If it is the case that attitudes can account for success or failure, then it follows that all concerned with language laboratories must interest themselves in what these attitudes are, how they manifest themselves and how they are engendered.

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES IN TEACHERS

Negative attitudes to the laboratory in teachers are often largely irrational or are post facto rationalisations. A typical example is the secondary school teacher who, without prior consultation, finds by an administrative decision that his school is to be equipped with a laboratory. He is afraid, feels inadequate,

ill-equipped, has problems with his students in the language laboratory, reacts against it, and then may attempt to justify his rejection on pedagogic grounds. Permutations of these factors most commonly induce negative attitudes.

Three points need to be made in connection with the situation:

a. Experience of laboratory users in a number of countries reveals that this situation is widespread, particularly, although by no means exclusively, among teachers using laboratories in schools.

b. Once they are established it is extremely difficult to transform these negative attitudes into positive attitudes.

c. Negative attitudes can be avoided by a precaution so obvious that perhaps by its very obviousness it is so often overlooked - training; ideally, training before the teacher is called on to use the laboratory.

ELEMENTS OF TRAINING PROGRAMMES AND POSITIVE ATTITUDES IN TEACHERS

It is not my aim to consider training programmes in detail. From Harper and Sharrocks, ELT Documents 73/2, 2 constituents of a training programme should be restated: the first is the need to include within the scope of the training programme the personnel-administrators, inspectors, advisers - who are responsible for installing the laboratory. Unless those who introduce the equipment fully appreciate the organisational problems it entails for their teachers and unless those problems are freely stated and discussed in a training context, any language laboratory programme is going to run into difficulties. It hardly needs saying that negative attitudes thrive and multiply on difficulties.

Secondly, an essential constituent of training programmes is materials preparation. Programme writing is not necessarily an end in itself if it is confined to stating a number of objectives. In terms of motivating positive attitudes, however, it is a highly significant factor. Experience on training courses has shown that the attitudes of groups of teachers who have written laboratory materials and then used these materials in the laboratory with students tend to change from hostile neutrality to positive affirmation.

Where training programmes do exist, it is likely that they have a set of aims which are pitched too low. Because of this the programmes have been limited to ensuring that the teachers can work the laboratory and that by the end of the course they are familiar with a range of published materials. If the aims are restated along the lines of 'engendering positive attitudes in teachers towards the language laboratory', then the design of programmes to achieve this aim will be more complex than is ordinarily assumed. Certainly, a simplified and rapid introduction course to the laboratory will not produce what is being sought: ie a teacher who has arrived at an understanding in practical terms of the role of the laboratory in his teaching situation. This realisation rests on the belief that there is scope in the laboratory for a far wider variety of controlled but contextualised productive practice than is often supposed and that there is a variety of ways in which taped texts in the laboratory as well as the classroom can be exploited.

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES IN STUDENTS

Negative attitudes, when they occur among students, manifest themselves in different ways, often depending on age. Most common to all age-groups perhaps are expressions of boredom, ranging from indiscipline in schoolchildren to complaints, or absence from laboratory sessions in adults. In seeking to rationalise this kind of unsatisfactory behaviour, teachers often - with some justification - make a blanket condemnation of the materials as sterile and boring. By this simplification they neatly avoid any personal responsibility for failure.

This again highlights the need for in-depth training of teachers and also introduces an equally important corollary - the training of students. This is, again, a neglected area because teachers tend to take too restricted a view of what can be expected of their students in the laboratory. Sights in many cases are set too low, the aim of initial orientation sessions in the language laboratory being simply to ensure that students understand how to operate the equipment. In some cases sights are set even lower; eg in schools where audio-active comparative laboratories are used only on an audio-active basis because of a fear that students will damage the machines by operating them.

a. If the objective of laboratory orientation is restated as the engendering of positive attitudes, then it is clear that orientation is a much more complex and crucial process than is commonly supposed, involving more than mere switch-manipulation. This is often felt but rarely expressed. It is, of course, an ongoing process in that even experienced students in the laboratory with certain kinds of practice material will still require prior practice with a teacher in order to know exactly what is expected of them in terms of response behaviour. However, it is during the early sessions in the laboratory that attitudes are formed and this is the time when the teacher has to put into operation a highly systematic and carefully planned set of procedures to ensure:

i. that the student has confidence in operating his end of the equipment and that he realises that he is the master of the machine;

ii. that he understands the pedagogic implications of the manipulations he is carrying out;

iii. that the groundwork of discrimination is laid;

iv. that essential laboratory discipline is understood;

v. that the teacher's role as monitor is clearly understood.

It is an interesting albeit parenthetical thought that the teacher is often called upon to carry out these procedures; this requires a bond of confidence between teacher and students at the beginning of the instruction.

b. I have come to the conclusion, after discussions with a wide range of colleagues, that it doesn't really matter in what order the elements of orientation are introduced, providing that what is done is carried out systematically and always with care being taken to link pedagogy to the machinery. What teachers need to elaborate are a variety of sets of procedures for orienting students to the laboratory within which ordering and selection will be determined by factors such as:

i. the type of equipment: I would say that the pedagogical uses of an AA laboratory are much less clear to both teacher and student than the AAC laboratory;

ii. the objectives of the course: in some courses the record facility is largely irrelevant;

iii. the age of the students;

iv. the mode of laboratory use, ie with the same teacher as in the classroom; with a laboratory teacher; without a teacher; on a library basis etc.

It used to be almost dogma amongst language laboratory users that in the first session students must record and listen to their own voices because

it was felt that this was motivating. This is partially true (if transitory), but it doesn't mean that all students have to do this in the first laboratory sessions or else all will be lost. I have found that an initial session spent in encouraging students to make intelligent use of the re-wind switch in a listening comprehension exercise, where the students didn't speak at all, was every bit as motivating, because the students very quickly grasped the fact that this facility of the student recorder requires only very little manual practice before they can accurately capture small segments of an utterance which have previously gone uncomprehended, and that constant repetition of the segment and its environment can often lead to comprehension without recourse to the teacher. The problem here for the teacher is not teaching the student how to work the machine, but ensuring from the beginning that the student understands by example the pedagogic implications of what he is doing.

This procedure accords with the classic ordering of skills. It is much more important that students should modify their expectation of an instant magical improvement in their command of spoken language and appreciate from the start the aural function of the laboratory.

I stated earlier, in defining the objectives of orientation, that the teacher's role as monitor should be clearly understood by the student. This needs some elaboration if only because monitoring is often treated as if the teacher alone were concerned. In developing a positive attitude towards the laboratory it is crucial to familiarise the student with the teacher's procedure for correcting his mistakes, if only to prepare him for the 'Big Brother' anxieties from which all students suffer initially. It is interesting to pursue this a little further to see what happens when students who have not been adequately briefed are monitored in an early laboratory session. In the session concerned (and this is a tribute to laboratory design) no student was aware that he was being monitored when the teacher was using the monitor switch in the 'eavesdrop' position. (The days when selection of the switch caused a resounding click in the student earphones, or the volume dropped, and he looked up at the teacher with a knowing smile, seem to have passed.) When, however, the teacher moved the switch in order to converse with the student, thereby stopping the student machine, the students when questioned later all reported one or other of a mixture of the following reactions:

a. shock or surprise varying with the tone of the teacher's voice;

b. irritation that concentration had been interrupted;

c. something had gone wrong with the machine;

d. that the teacher was addressing the whole class;

e. that he, the student, had made a mistake and was going to be corrected, a view reinforced when he looked up and saw that the teacher was looking directly at him.

It seems that we are in an area of potential neglect where, in a desire to get students and teachers into constructive laboratory practice quickly, we oversimplify their needs, thereby defeating this goal and actually preventing the formation of positive attitudes.